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ABSTRACT

In 1998, the Study Circles Resource Center, Arkansas Friends for Better Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, and Oklahoma League of Women Voters involved 900 people in Arkansas and Oklahoma in the Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools program to address educational problems and link the community and schools. Study circles use small, highly participatory, facilitated groups to explore such issues as race relations, crime, and violence. This program and research effort is the first focusing on the use of study circles in education on a statewide basis. Arkansas Friends endorsed the assistance of superintendents in efforts to involve parents in study-circle programs. Preliminary analysis of research data from 262 questionnaires and 216 post-questionnaires compiled by The Center for Research on Teaching and Learning at the University of Arkansas and the University of Oklahoma at Norman from 5 Arkansas cities indicates a positive response to this type of group dialogue and collaboration. The data indicate involvement of superintendents enhances parental participation and the use of trained facilitators in small-group deliberation is vital to the dialogue process. Superintendents could be the catalysts for educational change in Arkansas using better communication strategies through study circles to improve community involvement and school performance. (Contains 22 references.) (TEJ)

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Educational Community Study Circles: How Superintendents Can Enhance School Improvement through Community Dialogue

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Abstract

Almost 900 community citizens in Arkansas and Oklahoma took part in the first statewide-organized effort of public engagement on education in the United States. In the fall of 1998, four partners–Study Circles Resource Center of Pomfret, Connecticut; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in Austin, Texas; Arkansas Friends for Better Schools, and the League of Women Voters of Oklahoma–developed a program to involve citizens in dialogue and community problem solving on educational issues. The Center for Research on Teaching and Learning of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and the University of Oklahoma at Norman were research partners in this two-state effort of community collaboration.

Study Circles are a community involvement strategy for collaborative problem solving. They are small, highly participatory groups led by trained facilitators using techniques and materials provided by the Study Circles Resource Center. Citizens in communities across the United States have used the study circle program on public issues such as race relations and crime and violence. There have been single community efforts on education, but the program in Arkansas and Oklahoma was the first time that a statewide effort using the study circle concept has been used to focus on public education.

Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools fostered dialogue between diverse individuals and groups. This paper examines the Study Circles program on education that was conducted in Arkansas in the fall of 1998. The Arkansas sponsor, Arkansas Friends for Better Schools, adopted a significant point of view that the endorsement and assistance from the superintendents of the school districts would be essential to involve more parents in the Study Circle program. From the five school districts that participated in this first organized effort, one superintendent served as a facilitator and another was a participant of a study circle group. All five superintendents presented vital information for the use of this method of public engagement to enhance school and community relations.

Each partner of Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools had specific goals related to the needs of their state or organization, but they collaborated to develop and revise pre and post questionnaires. Five communities in Arkansas provided research data from 262 questionnaires and 216 post questionnaires. From these questionnaires, 152 were pre-post matches. The Center for Research on Teaching and Learning at the University of Arkansas in Little Rock is analyzing the questionnaires. The preliminary data indicates a positive response to this type of group dialogue and collaboration. The data also indicates superintendent involvement enhances parental involvement of parents of school-aged children. Furthermore, the data indicates that small group deliberation led by trained facilitators is vital to the dialogue process. The impact studies are being conducted at this time to document changes that have occurred a year following the 1998 Study Circles in Arkansas. Some of these findings are presented in this paper.

Educational Community Study Circles: How Superintendents Can Enhance School Improvement through Community Dialogue

Introduction

The diversity of American citizens in the 21st century calls for innovative means of new communication strategies. All of the factors that create the problems of educational change can be connected, through the process of effective communication, to give community citizens accurate information of the enormous tasks to be accomplished in education. Effective communication has essential characteristics that can influence the outcomes of the information received by internal and external sources. This is critical in citizen deliberations, administrator directives, classroom instruction, or any conversation between people. It is through experiencing the interchange of successful communication that problem-solving and new relationships are developed and bonding occurs between people (Hoy & Miskel, 1996). The ingenuity of communications in the transfer of information becomes the connection of the community to the schools of the 21st century.

It was Wheatley's (1992) contention that organizations should be willing to "give public voice" to information that many in the organization may already know. When people come together in new ways information can be actualized. Listening to different interpretations and then processing these interpretations permits reflective thinking and the sharing of these reflections can produce, "a small finding that grows as it feeds back on itself, building in significance with each new perception or interpretation" (p.115). This same theory applies to the community, an organization of citizens who are shareholders in the education of the students in the community schools.

Arkansas schools have intensely focused on the safety of their students with the rise in violence in our nation and the state itself. An example of "actualized information" that was

created and grew to new significance came as a result of the study circle program, Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools. One of the superintendents of the five school districts that participated in the Arkansas Calling the Roll program told of an incident concerning parents and their concern for school safety. A mother's simple suggestion–a telephone tree–became a coordinated effort at squelching false rumors that could have closed a school district.

A suicide in the town, because it was in the proximity of one of the public schools, became the catalyst for misinformation. Information that exceeds the speed of email spread throughout the town reporting that four, six, then eight bombs were supposedly found at the high school. The superintendent knew something must be done or schools would have to be closed due to the panic the rumors were producing. The superintendent remembered the offer from the Study Circles groups and the Study Circles coordinator to help and the "telephone tree" project was placed in action. Not only the telephone, but also the a fax machine was used by the organizer to "fax the facts" to send the correct information to businesses in the town. Other citizens who had been involved in Calling the Roll, were soon giving accurate information to their customers. Many students never knew that they received a day of instruction thanks to a mother's idea and the efforts of the community Study Circles.

History of Calling the Roll

The superintendent of this school district learned about the study circles program from the coordinator for Arkansas Friends for Better Schools. A nonprofit partnership once supported by grants from the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation and Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, Arkansas Friends is an alliance of advocates for public education representing fourteen education, religious, and business organizations. Groups such as Arkansas School Boards Association, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, Arkansas PTA, Delta Kappa

Gamma International–Kappa State, Arkansas Education Association, and Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators were active in discussions with shareholders about their concerns with public education in Arkansas. These discussions resulted in a search for a new approach to involve shareholders.

The search for such an approach brought the leaders of Arkansas Friends to a meeting sponsored by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) in 1996 at Santa Fe, New Mexico. It was here that these leaders heard of the successful use of the study circles method by the Oklahoma League of Women Voters in a program addressing criminal justice. After this presentation, Arkansas Friends met with SEDL and leaders from the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) to discuss study circles on education–the new interest of SEDL and SCRC (D. Farley, Personal Communication, December 16, 1999).

The initial planning for statewide educational study circles included Oklahoma, Arkansas and New Mexico. Oklahoma League of Women Voters (LWV) was enlisted first. A meeting in Fort Smith, Arkansas in 1997 convinced Arkansas Friends that the process used by Study Circles was one worth trying. Friends had to be supported by SEDL as the organizations in Arkansas Friends were support groups with little assistance for the funding of the project. The group voted to proceed and joined Oklahoma as the second state in the program later named Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools. SCRC and SEDL were the national sponsoring organizations. Arkansas Friends for Better Schools and Oklahoma League of Women Voters represented the state organizations for this first statewide attempt to involve citizens in discussions about public schools. The Center for Research on Teaching and Learning at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and the University of Oklahoma at Norman were included to assist their state in the research efforts.

In Arkansas, five school boards and superintendents meeting with other community leaders empowered a community coordinator and various study circles committees to organize the community study circles. In Oklahoma, the League of Women Voters used their existing community organizations from the previous study circles effort. Facilitators for the study circle groups were trained by Study Circles Resource Center and materials for the effort were produced by SCRC and SEDL. SEDL made initial contacts to state legislators in an effort to connect policymakers with constituents through the study circle method. Both states wanted their citizens to be informed about public schools with the goal of building support from the dialogue and deliberations.

The superintendent and school boards of selected communities in Arkansas were invited by Arkansas Friends to participate in Calling the Roll. There were basic criteria for the selection of these sites. Arkansas Friends considered inviting fifteen communities in hopes of obtaining the ten sites needed for the 1998 program. The schools in the Mississippi delta region and other Arkansas schools in distress were top priority, but other criteria was necessary to assure participation. Some prerequisites for site invitation included the support of the local school board and school administrators, contacts with the organizations of Arkansas Friends, presence of a "civic" infrastructure to build the community organization, a weekly or daily newspaper, communities that had member (s) of the Arkansas House and Senate, and a reflection of the geographic, cultural, racial and ethnic diversity of the state (Arkansas Friends for Better Schools, 1997).

The decision to link study circles with community through the schools was seen by Arkansas Friends as a vital strategy if parents were to come to these discussions. With little experience and much anticipation of permitting group discussions such as study circles,

superintendents and school boards were slower in committing to the program than the community coordinators in Oklahoma. The situation was different in Oklahoma because LWV already had a statewide organization in existence and those communities that signed up for Calling the Roll knew about the concept of the study circle method. By August of 1998 Oklahoma had ten communities signed up for their program, however, it would be October before Arkansas Friends could declare five school district communities that would represent their organization's efforts (AR Friends, 1998).

The study circle project is now under the direction of the Arkansas School Boards Association. Since the 1998 Calling the Roll program, new study circles have been started, others are planned, and superintendents and school boards are showing an increased interest in having the study circle program. One school district is preparing for the third round of community study circles. The study circle method appears to be strongest in school districts where superintendent and school board have coordinated the efforts and worked with citizens for the needs of the schools. Arkansas Friends was committed to this approach–"We anticipate that our approach will ultimately be more effective and produce results because from the very beginning, school leadership was invested in the project and willing to work with the community's recommendations" (White, 1999).

Research Efforts

Each partner of Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools had specific goals related to the needs of their state or organization, but they collaborated to develop and revise pre and post questionnaires. The questionnaires provided demographics and other participant information, evaluated the Study Circles program, and examined the impact of the Study Circles on the development of action plans to assist the community public schools. Five communities in

Arkansas provided research data from 262 pre-questionnaires and 216 post questionnaires. From these questionnaires, 152 were pre-post matches. The purpose of the pre-post match was to find participants who had been part of the study circle group from the first session when they completed the pre-questionnaire to the last session where the post questionnaire was given. Some questions from the pre-questionnaire were included in the post questionnaire to determine changes in attitudes and opinions over the four-week period of dialogue. This was also a way to match participant demographics (on the pre-questionnaire only) with the results of both questionnaires. Oklahoma had nine communities that provided research data from 338 pre questionnaires and 164 post questionnaires with 91 pre-post questionnaire matches. To ensure pre-post matches, the questionnaires were compared by questionnaire id (the last four digits of the participant's social security number) and the participant's birthdate. To ensure further accuracy, the questionnaires were recorded as they were received into CRTL. Group and location coding provided additional accuracy in determining the pre-post match. The final check for validation was through the post questionnaire that determined the number of sessions each participant attended.

The research efforts are significant in that no research has been conducted on the impact of statewide-organized study circles on education. The findings of the partners are contributing to the knowledge of this method from each partner's unique approach to the program. Arkansas Friends, assisted by the Center for Research on Teaching and Learning (CRTL) of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, made the decision to evaluate the program a year following the study circles. The evaluation would seek to identify any changes that may have occurred as a result of linking the Arkansas Study Circles with superintendents and school boards. The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of the 1998 Calling the Roll program as it relates to school

superintendents. The early findings of the perceptions of the superintendents that participated in the program will be presented. Implementations of action recommendations are included as these activities relate to the literature review of the paper.

Study Circles

What study circles can offer to the educational community are discussion groups that permit a mix of people to approach a single program from their distinct vantage points. Parents with administrators, teachers with local businesspeople, organization leaders with students are examples of new connections that can produce a diversity of opinions and ideas. In each meeting, there is the potential for discovering new leaders in the community, beginning new connections and giving needed support to existing institutions (SCRC, 1996).

The study circle has distinctive characteristics that reveal the simple process of the structure:

- "A study circle is comprised of ten to fifteen people who meet regularly over a period of weeks or months to address a critical issue in a democratic and collaborative way.
- A study circle is facilitated by a person who is there not to act as an expert on the issue, but to serve the group by keeping the discussion focused, helping the group consider a variety of views, and asking probing questions.
- A study circle looks at an issue from many points of view. Study circle facilitators and discussion materials give everyone a home in the conversation and help the group explore areas of common ground.
- A study circle progresses from a session on personal experience (How does the issue affect me?) to sessions providing a broader perspective (what are others saying about the issue?) to a session on action (What can we do about the issue?)" (Scully & Leighninger, 1998)

The Study Circles Resource Center found that community citizens gain ownership of the issues and a deeper understanding of their own and other's perspectives and concerns. They discover common ground and have a greater desire and ability to work collaboratively to solve

policies. These connections assist community members in leading to new levels of community action and new levels of understanding between community leaders and citizens (Scully & Leighninger, 1998).

The five superintendents of the Arkansas Study Circles effort agreed that these outcomes were present in the 1998Calling the Roll program. All five agreed that the strongest outcome that they observed (whether they were involved directly in a study circle group or not) was the deeper understanding of their own and other's perspectives and concerns. As one superintendent described this outcome:

> *I think that's where the process does a really good job for the group interaction provided people with viewpoints that–and it was almost like you could see a light bulb come on and they would say–"I never would have saw it like that". That's refreshing to see that their minds were open enough to even listen.*

Critical administrative practice must consider what community can offer through the values of "unity, solidarity, and cohesiveness" (Maxcy, 1995, p. 130). People must be supplied with accurate and adequate information about the school system if they are to form intelligent opinions and transmit their thinking to school officials (Gallagher, Bagin & Kindred, 19997). The capacity to gather accurate information influenced parents in decision-making. In the post questionnaire of Calling the Roll, Arkansas (91%; n=152) and Oklahoma (85%; n=91) participants would obtain information about the school from the school. With this high percentage of citizens depending on the school for information, it is understandable that communications was a top recommendation from all of the study circle groups in Arkansas.

Study Circles participants in one school district made a recommendation at the Action Forum to televise school board meetings The school board and superintendent listened to parents and other citizen's request to be more informed about their school district. They acted upon their recommendation and all patrons of their school district can now be kept current on school

recommendation and all patrons of their school district can now be kept current on school matters through televised school board meetings and a school district Web site. The Web site recently presented the new school calendar, allowing school patrons to review the dates before the board approves it. The employees of the school district are featured on the Web site as well as the happenings at the individual schools. Each school is expected to have a Web page by 2002, according to the strategic plans adopted after Calling the Roll.

Gallagher, Bagin, and Kindred (1997) emphasized that schools that communicate with their external publics have better public support, criticism is minimized, community values and priorities are learned, and ideas are received that that can help educate students. Arkansas superintendents have and are using other methods to permit citizen input for the work of the school district. One school district superintendent has a radio broadcast where information is given about the school board meeting and citizens can call in and ask questions. This superintendent used an earlier method of involving citizens in discussion through a superintendent's advisory council. Another superintendent used focus groups in a previous community, but commented that:

> *I have used processes similar to this, but not of this magnitude. I have not involved this diverse of a group of people with decisions like this. Usually you target key people, especially those that might be knowledgeable or vocal about certain issues and you include those on your committees. This is what I was most pleased with about this. Often times you would get real good information from the quietest grandma in the group and I think that enlightened me on the importance of getting input from everybody.*

An indication that citizens want to give information to schools is found in the pre/post comparison item that stated, "My opinion is important to the people who make decisions about education and our schools." Almost 30% of Oklahoma participants and 21% of Arkansas participants somewhat or strongly disagreed with that statement. It was brought home to an

We think we're doing a great job...and we may be doing a good job, but in this case we weren't communicating. We tend to forget that the group out there changes. New parents come in. The perception is ...that schools, city government, whatever–"No one is listening to us"– and the board, everyone of the board, saying..."we're going to do this. We've got to listen to them when they bring something in". They've mentioned Study Circles many, many times...so I think it's improved the trust and relationship with our patrons.

This superintendent was committed to correcting the misperception. It was extremely difficult for a superintendent who already has an open door policy to believe that citizens felt the need for more communication. Yet when the superintendent saw that this request was coming from all of the study circle groups, the problem immediately became a priority for action from the superintendent and his administrative staff.

Communities can and do put pressure on district administrators when a school problem is heightened or major changes are adopted within the district. They can also be passive and do nothing. When major innovations are attempted within school districts without informing and involving the community, community citizens can launch efforts to stop the programs and most of the time will prevail over the educational system. Educational administrators will have to recognize that effective educational reform may well rely on community support - for funding, for parent and family influence, and school board endorsement that results from community pressures (Fullan, 1991).

The need of an effective communication channel is seen as critical to the ability of our schools to make the necessary educational changes required for the 21st century student. The objective of Arkansas Friends in Calling the Roll was to encourage citizens, especially parents, to sit down with each other, listen, and talk about the problems and needs of the public schools. In asking one superintendent to give their opinion about the use of Study Circles as a change agent, the superintendent explained.

Change is scary to a lot of people. Things can't be done totally the way we used to. Some things we do need to continue doing the way we always have. But there's just a lot of societal changes and technological changes in various things that are affecting education right now. We must do a better job of communicating with each other that we're going to have to make some changes and try to work together to see that they are positive changes for the betterment of the young people and for a strong educational program...if we work together, they will be a whole lot better than if we're pulling apart. Then a study circle, or whatever else you want to call it, as long as people are sitting down together and willing to listen to each other and reason together, then we certainly have a better chance of making whatever changes that need to be made.

Oklahoma participants found that learning about other people's ideas best described the study circle experience while the participants of Arkansas said discussing education issues was the best description of their study circle experience. Both factors were the top two choices for Oklahoma and Arkansas participants. Calling the Roll provided a safe atmosphere where the structure of the group process permitted citizens to communicate in attentive listening in order to understand the viewpoint of others.

Rose and Gallup (1998) believed that educational leaders should build the necessary support for worthwhile ideas "to move the public schools in the direction they need to go" (p. 54). The 30th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll on the Public's Attitudes toward the Public School has been used to provide decision-makers with data based on public opinion. Rose and Gallup believed that in a democratic society the public schools "are dependent upon an informed and supportive public" (p. 35). A significant part of the public remained to be persuaded that children today receive a better education than in the past. This indicated that administrators and those in the educational community need to involve every citizen in accurate communication about the work being done in the public schools.

Study Circles Resource Center encourages building of coalitions to develop circles that have a wide variety of people and organizations. These organizations should provide people "with high visibility on the issue, some with strong connections to the grass roots, and some on

opposing sides of the issue you're addressing" (Scully & Leighninger, 1998, p. 35). On issues relating to education specifically, the educational personnel of the school district have the high visibility and make connections daily with parents, who are grass roots and represent opposing sides.

Without accurate communication citizens can engage in the major roadblocks to communication such as "judging, sending solutions, and avoiding the other's concerns" (Bolton, 1979, p. 17). According to Bolton, these roadblocks impede problem solving and enlarge the emotional distance between people. Superintendents of Calling the Roll believed that this could be a weakness of the study circle if individuals were permitted to have a gripe session. One superintendent expressed his concern with these comments:

> *I think if you're not careful, the study circles could become a gripe session...this is my chance to tell you everything that's wrong with the school instead of..."this is important– how are we going to go about doing it?"*

Placing the blame on the other person or group occurs in all school districts. Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999) of the Harvard Negotiation Project claimed that focusing on blame is a bad idea. This "inhibits our ability to learn what's really causing the problem and to do anything meaningful to correct it" (p. 59). The authors defined blame as judging, and provided a new term for problem solving - contribution. Contribution is seen as a way to understand situations and people in relationship to the event. It is a system that attempts to understand the viewpoints of the other individual involved in the interaction.

The inclusion of school administrators in the study circles provided participants with accurate information about the school district. One school district's administrators did not participate because the coordinators were concerned that it would inhibit free discussion. According to the state coordinator, this may have worked against a fuller and fairer discussion of

some of the issues. The superintendent agreed that a true cross section of the constituency must be represented to provide information, especially where new citizens or citizens who have been upset by a single incident are the majority of the study circle groups. If superintendents and other administrators are not involved in the organization and participation of the study circles, citizens are not afforded the opportunity of interaction with school authorities. In order to be effective, 21st century schools must include two way interaction with those in authority and involve a network of both external and internal influences in equal importance (Fullan, 1994).

To assure all participants an equal chance to express their opinion SCRC provides training for the group facilitator. The trained facilitator is another safeguard to a fair and democratic discussion involving diverse opinions. The trained facilitator helps the group establish its own ground rules, which are posted on a wall. Some favorite rules are:

- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Share "air time."
- One person speaks at a time.
- Speak for yourself, not for others.
- If you are offended, say so.
- You can disagree, but don't personalize it. Stick to the issue. No name-calling or stereotyping.
- What is said in this group stays here, unless everyone agrees to change that. (Scully & Leighninger, 1998, p. 4).

The facilitator for the study circle groups was given high marks by Arkansas and Oklahoma participants. Arkansas participants (n=208) and Oklahoma participants (n=152) agreed strongly that facilitator gave everyone a change to talk about their opinions in the discussions (AR - 95%; OK - 89%) and that the facilitator set a friendly and relaxed tone for the conversation (AR - 87%; OK - 92%) (Dickerson & Chesser, 1999).

One superintendent who served as a facilitator was asked about the facilitator's importance to the success of the group discussions and the assurance that the information was accurate.

> *Our facilitators were trained, of course, to try to gather consensus before the meeting ever ended. My particular group–I would take the recorder's information–take about 5 minutes at the end to read the information that she had gathered, and we would ask the group at that time, "Is there was anything that's left out that's important? Is there anything that's not what we stated?" Sometimes we made changes and sometimes we didn't.*

When Arkansas participants (n=204) were asked on the post questionnaire if the facilitator tried to influence the group with his or her own views, 62% strongly disagreed, and 23% disagreed somewhat. White (1999) stated that "a lesson that was learned was that careful training is critical to study circle success. As a general rule, people who were trained thoroughly and by the most experienced trainers were more effective discussion facilitators."

Civic Influence

The influence of the facilitator training carried over into developing new leaders. The confidence that comes from being a facilitator can be transferred to other situations in community service. One example is a facilitator who is heading up the community drama presentation that involves students. Her superintendent remarked that he did not believe this facilitator would have attempted the leadership had it not been for the experience in Calling the Roll. Students have also found places of leadership from the interactions with adults. In one Arkansas community, students are training adults in computer use. They are cooperating with adults to gather an oral history of their community. Students are also realizing that they can change their approach to problems. The superintendent who encouraged these students to participate inCalling the Roll made this observation:

> *Our students seem to be more eager to express themselves in an appropriate way. If there's something they're bothered with, we guide them through the process of using their*

students council...so it's not so much anymore, you know, if you don't like it, you gripe about it. If it's a major problem to us, then let's address it. I think it's shown them that there is a process through which change can take place, but you have to get their trust. There's not a lot of finger snap decisions made in our world. It has to be by a process.

Students that attended Calling the Roll were given a model for active listening skills. The trained facilitator used the communication skills of reflecting, clarifying, summarizing, shifting focus, using silence, and using non-verbal and verbal signals. Using the materials provided by SCRC, the facilitators learned how to help the group come to common ground and use questions that could result in productive discussion. They were given suggestions for dealing with problems such as participants who don't say anything, those who are try to dominate the discussion, false information, and open conflict (Study Circles Resource Center Facilitator's Packet). The superintendent that had more students that participated inCalling the Roll said that the process used in the study circle had certainly been brought up in the civics classes.

Community Support for School Change

Perhaps at no time in the history of education has community support been needed as desperately as it is today. Most public schools are struggling with parent involvement in student learning, particularly in the upper grades. The reforms and restructuring efforts of school districts have taken their toll on administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Fullan (1991) stated if the meaning of educational change is frustrating enough for teachers and administrators who "spend 40 to 60 hours a week immersed in the educational world". The parent who is less educated will have even more problems then the highly educated parents concerning these changes. Already feeling uncomfortable when interacting with the school, many simply leave their responsibility for their children's education to the school. Communication roadblocks have hindered the relationships with many parents.

According to Gallagher, Bagin, and Kindred (1997) the "traditional support base" of parents with children in grades K-12 "has been eroded" (p. 5). Some parents, particularly those in the upper grades, do not feel wanted by the educational system. There are others, according to one superintendent that,

> *Although attempts were made to involve the parents, some parents refuse to be involved and take little, if any, responsibility for some of their children's action at school. Some parents have even upheld their children's action at school, and in fact, coached them into doing certain things at school.*

Fullan (1991) warned that some situations of parent involvement were not best if they result in lowered morale or endless conflict, but the efforts and "strategies to involve parents represent one of the most powerful underutilized instruments for educational reform" (p. 246). The need for parent involvement in schools is documented as highly important to the achievement of students. All schools must make a greater effort to involve parents, and most do make the effort, but the current view is that it is more difficult to include parents in the educational program. The advantage of the community organization that sponsors the community study circles may hold a key to involving parents and others, such as retired citizens and ethnic groups. There are indications that the study circles will give schools the support that is needed during this period of school change.

Influence of Sponsoring Organizations

Indications of the influence of the two states sponsoring organization are evident from the demographics of Arkansas and Oklahoma participants. It is seen even further in comparison of items that occur on either or both the pre and the post questionnaires. Of the top five ways that participants in Oklahoma heard about Study Circles, The League of Women Voters, the sponsoring organization in Oklahoma, was first with 44%. Arkansas participants (43%) heard of Calling the Roll through the school. Arkansas Friends asked the school superintendents and

school boards to sponsor the Study Circles project. Evidence of the influence of the League of Women Voters is seen in the information about government and politics. Those participants that responded to the question about voting in an election revealed that 89% of Oklahoma participants had voted as compared to 75% for Arkansas participants of Calling the Roll. A relationship to the schools as organizer was also evident in the question asked Arkansas and Oklahoma participants: "How much do you know about the schools in your community?" A significant relationship among the Arkansas participants was indicated by the Wilcoxson Signed Ranks Test ($p<.001$, 2 tailed). Further investigation into these relationships is ongoing with the partners of Calling the Roll (Dickerson & Chesser, 1999).

The percentage of parents with school age children who attended the 1998 Study Circles continues the basis for discussion of the influence of the sponsoring organizations. In the pre-post comparison of Calling the Roll participants who took both the pre and post questionnaire, 72 Arkansas parents represented 47% of the Arkansas pre/post matches (n=152). Thirty-one Oklahoma parents represented 34%of the Oklahoma participants (n=91). The involvement and influence of school district leaders with school parents in the organization of this community project suggests a communication method for participation in new and innovative strategies for parent dialogue in school improvement. Information from the pre/post comparison revealed that parents who took the pre and post questionnaires related to the sponsoring organizations and state responses (Dickerson & Chesser, 1999).

Arkansas parents from the pre/post match heard about the Study Circles project from the school (35%), and Oklahoma parents from the League of Women Voters (48%). Parents in Arkansas and Oklahoma differed in the schools their children were enrolled in. The Arkansas participants who took the pre and post tests (N=70) reported 99% enrollment in public schools

Arkansas and Oklahoma differed in the schools their children were enrolled in. The Arkansas participants who took the pre and post tests (N=70) reported 99% enrollment in public schools. Oklahoma parents who took the pre and post tests (N=31) reported 87% in public schools, 10% in private schools, and 3% in home schools. These percentages reflect a need for further evaluation of the diversity of citizens that can be brought together by differing organizations to learn of other citizen's views about education, discuss school issues, and deliberate possible solutions to these issues (Dickerson & Chesser, 1999).

Superintendents Reflections on Study Circles

The Arkansas superintendents of the 1998 Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools were asked about the strengths and weaknesses of the study circles program on education. Some of these perceptions have been covered in other parts of this paper. The following are excerpts from the impact evaluation a year following the 1998 program and represent five unique viewpoints, yet the similarities of their personal evaluations can guide other superintendents who choose to pursue community dialogue as a way to enhance school improvement.

Calling the Roll superintendents saw the strengths of the study circle method of democratic deliberation for community problem solving in the following ways:

> *An avenue of public engagement...open communication...people getting to know each other.*
>
> *The identification...that you're reflecting what the community values in school. When people feel like...what they say is important and that they're being listened to...*
>
> *Getting the information out...listening to people...at the Women's Club (last week) they asked about Study Circles and they were listening...the potential is unlimited...when you've got more than one circle... several circles working on the same situation, you're going to get information back–to make decisions at least.*

what you can communicate across the barriers of community and school. It incorporates all aspects of community and school, pulls the strength from all of it, and gives the opportunity for youth and community to talk.

It was difficult for the superintendents to find the weakness in a program that they all believed had great potential to connect school with community. However, there were concerns and words of caution that were from their personal experience and reflections. Each superintendent of Calling the Roll contributed to these comments.

I think a lot of people came on board early on and didn't stay the course, and dropped out, and in fact, there's not been any meetings in a long, long time...

I just don't feel that we got a true cross section of the community. It seemed that we got loaded up too heavy with new people...with people who had some type of negative experience. I don't know if that's a weakness. I'd just say that it's important that you get a good cross section...people who have an understanding about how things function and that sort of thing.

Guard against special interest groups that want to get in...(use) a number of circles...not just two or three to dominate the whole. Again, somehow or other, people can control two or three groups, but I don't think they can control several.

If you do your study circles and then do nothing that's suggested or don't put forth any effort on their ideas, then you can't continue the process of study circles. You lose them. You lose everybody. But if you can produce results...if you can show them all over–here's what you've told us that you wanted–here's what we've done. Then it just strengthens the process.

I guess the weaknesses, if there were a weakness in study circles, is that human nature sometimes, we're wanting to create this openness and reception to ideas. Some people would see that as an opportunity to get things done. So you always run a risk of the community, especially as an educational institution, you run the risk of the community trying to send you in the wrong direction–a direction that may not be educationally founded. That did not happen to us, but it was one of my concerns.

One Calling the Roll superintendent wanted to adapt the study circle format to his particular school district to bring together diverse groups such as ethnic parents and retired citizens. All superintendents cautioned and strongly advised the consideration of a permanent

coordinator if study circles continued to be used. As one superintendent balanced the positive and negative sides of the organizer's responsibilities:

> *You need to pull in all the constituencies to find out what they think and I don't think you'll find any school improvement plan that's worth anything that doesn't address that in some form or fashion. This was a format to do that and I think that it's got a lot of value and a lot of merit. I do think that you have to have somebody who has the designated time to do that, to stay with it, because if you don't, the professional people that are coming in to work with you–they're not going to stay with you. They're not going to stay with it. Your school people that have other primary duties that's going to swallow up all their time...you've got to have somebody to coordinate it, to follow through...to keep you on track.*

Summary

According to Gallagher, Bagin, & Kindred (1997) the two main purposes of communication with internal and external publics is to "foster student achievement" and "build citizen knowledge and understanding that leads to financial support" (p. 7). The beginning of the 21st century is a time of accountability for the public schools of America. After sixteen years of warnings concerning the nation of the declining quality of education in public schools, the threat of mediocrity that threatens the nation still remains, according to 1999 Action Statement of the 1999 National Education Summit. The Summit was sponsored by Achieve, Inc. and co-sponsored by six national organizations. Educators, policymakers, CEOs and other business leaders declared that there was abundant evidence of an awakening of our nation toward the significant problem that faced America, but came together to confirm the commitment to improve teacher quality, provide all students a fair opportunity to meet higher standards, and hold schools accountable for the results (Action Statement, 1999 National Education Summit).

The accountability factor was combined with a call to couple increased accountability with increased flexibility and support for educators. The challenge of this decision was the inclusion of strong public support. Parents and the public were to have a clear understanding of

why it was critical to expect better performance from schools and students. The call came for information and data to drive improvement and alert the parents and public of the consequences of lowering standards, especially in the face of public pressure (1999 National Education Summit).

The 1998 Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools was intended to involve the entire community in discussion about public education. The significance of this program is in the timing of this statewide effort and the use of the study circle method to engage community citizens in democratic deliberation and participation to promote support of public schools. The removal of students by parents from the public school to private or home schools, the call for and organization of charter schools, and the use of vouchers for school choice, leaves a void in the support system of the public schools. The need for information through effective communication is a strength of study circles. If the study circles method continues to be used in the Arkansas communities of Calling the Roll, the study will provide knowledge to future generations concerning the use of this method of citizen democratic deliberation as a means of reconnecting the community to the public schools of Arkansas. The impact of the 1998 program can leave a record of community response to problems affecting the students of the 21st century. Others in America may learn from the results ofCalling the Roll and the Arkansas school districts that pioneered the return to community movement through educational study circles.

The inclusion of citizen responsibility guarantees that private individuals with narrow private interests will not overcome the good for all citizens. "Only the public can support consistent government over the long term" (Sokoloff, 1996, p. 13). We have to draw our citizens in to participate in solving the problem of ways to meet these needs. "We have a choice – we can be overcome by whatever the future brings, or we can help shape it" (Uchida, et al., 1996, p. 1).

With an unstable and unpredictable school environment where the social and political environment no longer can guarantee a safe school, Johnson (1996) advocated the building of partnerships to support children and families. Johnson is one among many who advocate a "new superintendency" in response to the call to restructuring schools (Johnson, 1996; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Spillane & Regnier, 1998). The superintendent of a community's school district could be the catalyst for change in Arkansas this year. A leader who attempts this new road may clear the communication path for education in the 21st century.

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